

Colorado Music Educators Association
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Mystery Solved: Easy and Effective Techniques for Teaching Jazz Improvisation
Improvisation Techniques Using Key Centers
Nick Keelan, Lawrence University
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Most common chord progressions in jazz

- Major II -V -I progression
- Minor II-V-I progression
- Modal progression
- Blues progression

For the purpose of this discussion, modal progressions and blues progressions will only receive quick treatment. The focus will be on major and minor II-V-I progressions.

This presentation will not address developing aural skills in jazz players. My friend and colleague at Lawrence, Fred Sturm, has prepared an excellent document called “All Ears” which does an excellent job suggesting specific exercises for teaching and improving aural skills in beginning and advanced players. With the kind permission of Fred, this paper is available for download on the Lawrence web site referred to at the end of this document.

How this system of using key centers works

- The goal is to group several chords together so that a single major scale may be used over all of them.
- Because most players know and regularly practice major scales, this method works well for those who are just beginning to improvise. It also works well for those more advanced players who encounter a new tune and want to sound good the first time playing a solo on that tune.
- This method is used to simplify the scale choices for the vast majority of chord progressions encountered in jazz. In some cases the scale choice is not the best but it works.
- The ear begins to take over, helping the player to find the best notes and pass over the notes that don't sound as good.
- This system is NOT an end point but a means to get more students improvising.

Tasks for the director

- SIMPLIFY for the students. Only a few advanced students are capable of understanding chord symbols. Challenge those students but for the majority, SIMPLIFY.
- Provide a safe environment for students to learn to improvise. Typically this starts with several students improvising at once and gradually goes to single students.
- Even though it means lesser players are playing solos, avoid have the same few students play all of the solos.
- Select tunes that are at the level of the students trying to solo. (Learning to analyze tunes using the suggested method makes finding appropriate music much easier).
- Learn to read chord symbols and see major and minor II-V-I progressions.

- Teach FORM to students. The form of most tunes is easy to identify and students will learn to hear the form. Knowing the form and knowing that the form repeats over and over vastly simplifies the challenge of improvising.
- Provide practice tracks of tunes for students to practice with at home. The Aebersold series is a vast library of practice material at ALL levels.
- Teach aural skills by having students play simple tunes BY EAR. Do this in your concert groups as well.

Tasks for the students

- Learn major scales.
- Practice playing simple tunes by ear.
- Take a Chance.

Form types and basic jazz theory

- Blues, typically 12 bars.
- Modal tunes, typically grouped in 4 and 8 bar phrases.
- Jazz standards, usually 32 bars. Typically the 32 bar forms are in four 8 bar phrases and grouped such as AABA, ABAB, ABAC, etc. with these letters representing similar melodic material and/or chord progressions.
- Most of these jazz standards will contain major and minor II-V-I progressions. Some are shortened to II-V or V-I and will not contain the entire II-V-I progression.
- A WONDERFUL resource of jazz standards for study and performance is The Real Book sixth edition published by Hal Leonard. If one spends a few hours studying tunes in the Real Book for form and II-V-I progressions all of this theory will begin to make sense.
- While knowing all of the modes is a nice thing, remember that modes are still major scales. While most student will have no clue what a Locrian mode is, every student with minimal skills playing major scales can easily play a major scale starting on the 7th tone.

Identifying the form of a standard jazz piece

- Most pieces use the following basic pattern:
 - Introduction
 - Melody and form throughout the entire form
 - Solo section which duplicates the melody form
 - Out chorus which is a final time through the entire form
 - Perhaps a short tag or coda
- Find the start of the form (melody) after the introduction.
- Look at either the melody or the chord progression to identify the typical 8 bar phrases. Most likely the form will end at the start of the solo section.
- To organize the material put the 8 bar phrases into a form grouping similar sections such as AABA, ABAB, ABAC, etc.
- Look at the solo section to see that it follows the form of the melody (it will unless it is a RARE exception).
- Look at the end of the piece after the solo section to see that the form is repeated to end the tune (unless it is a RARE exception it will be repeated in entirety).
- Look at the end of the piece to see if there is a tag or coda that extends the form for a short time to give a more effective ending.

Why bother with the form?

- Repeated material means there is actually less material to study and teach.
- Solo sections should follow the form of the piece and not be randomly structured.
- A great way to get more students soloing is to give the harder parts of the form to better soloists and the easier sections to the less experienced soloists.
- A great way to give soloists more confidence is to add a background behind the solo. Often this is not provided by the composer in the solo section but such background material CAN be found in other parts of the tune and used during the solo sections as needed.
- Knowing the form and teaching students to hear it is a great tool for teaching better musicianship. For example in an AABA tune one might suggest to the students that in the first A section play soft, the second A is louder, the B section is the fullest, and the last A diminuendos to the end. Solo sections can be done the same way by both the soloist and the backgrounds.
- Knowing the form and learning to see and hear it is FUN. When justifying “why music” this is a powerful tool (and a confusing one for non-musicians) in justifying the complexity and mental challenge of the art. I would also suggest that teaching an administrator to hear form is not a bad idea.

Aebersold Improvisation recordings / books to practice these techniques. Get these recordings your local music store or order from Aebersold online.

- vol. 24 Maior and Minor (works all major and scales)
- vol. 54 Maiden Voyage (fun tunes to practice applying key centers)

Special resource:

- vol 76 of the Aebersold series lists alphabetically ALL of the tunes in the Aebersold Improvisation series. This list can also be found on the Aebersold web site at www.jazzbooks.com.

Modal Progression

A modal progression stays on one chord for several measures before moving to the next chord. It does not typically follow any major or minor II-V-I progression. Select the correct major scale by finding the best fit from the system described above.

Blues progression

A blues progression is a special progression that may use the techniques described above but also employs other techniques. For information and practice with blues progressions use the following Aebersold volumes:

- vol. 2 Nothin' But Blues
- vol. 42 Blues in all Keys
- vol. 57 Minor Blues

And now the real theory stuff

An essential skill: One must be able to quickly identify the circle of 5ths.

Bb Eb Ab Db Gb B E A D G C F Bb
G# C# F# Cb

Major II-V-I progression

II chord: m, mi, min, -7, 9, 11, or 13
The II chord is built on the second degree of a major scale.

V chord: 7,9, 11, or 13
The V chord is built on the fifth degree of a major scale.

I chord , Maj, M, or Ma 6, 7, 9
The I chord is built on the first degree of a major scale.

example:	II	V	I
	Dm7	G7	CMa7
	2nd tone of C major	5th tone of C major	1st tone of C major
	dorian mode	mixolydian mode	major scale

When improvising use the same major scale (C major scale) for all three chords.

Minor II-V-I progression

II chord: mi7(b5), 7
Use a major scale a 1/2 step above the letter name of the chord.

V chord: 7b9, 7b5b9, 7#9, 7#5#9
Use the same major scale as on the II chord.

I chord: m, mi, min, -6, 7, 9, 11, 13
Use the same major scale as on the II chord.

example:	II	V	I
	Dmi7b5	G7b9	Cmi6
	Eb major scale	Eb major scale	Eb major scale
	locrian mode		relative major scale

When improvising use the same major scale (Eb major scale) for all three chords.
It is a bit of a stretch to make this work for advanced improvisers but it does work fine for the beginning improviser.

Contacting me

Nick Keelan, associate professor of trombone
Lawrence University Conservatory of Music
711 E. Boldt Way
Appleton, WI 54911
Office phone: (920)832-6630
Email: nickkeelan@lawrence.edu
Web: www.lawrence.edu/fast/keelann/